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DRUGS IN CRASHES AND IMPAIRED DRIVING ARRESTS

In 1988, NHTSA synthesized existing research in a report to Congress and found that drugs were present in 10-22 percent of crash involved drivers. The report also noted that Los Angeles Police Department personnel estimated that 20 percent of persons arrested for impaired driving were under the influence of drugs. In addition, when drugs were found in either crash involved or arrested drivers, they were found most often in combination with alcohol.

These findings led NHTSA to initiate a program to assist states and communities to implement drug impairment investigation procedures that had been pioneered in Los Angeles. The Drug Evaluation and Classification (DEC) program is a standardized systematic method for police officers to determine whether drivers are impaired by drugs, and if so, to identify the classes of drugs involved. DEC programs, and their specially trained drug recognition experts (DREs), now exist in about half of the states.

Research Needs

All available studies of drug incidence in crashes were from limited geographic areas and focused on special driver populations such as young males. No study addressed the overall causal role of drugs in crashes nor the effectiveness of DEC programs outside metropolitan Los Angeles. Between 1988 and 1991, NHTSA began two studies to address three issues:

- What is the incidence of drugs in fatally injured drivers?
- To what extent do drugs and drug-alcohol combinations contribute to fatal crashes?
- In DEC program communities, what is the incidence of drugged-driving arrests and convictions?

The following summarizes these research results.

Study of Drug Incidence and Culpability in Fatal Crashes

Blood specimens were obtained from nearly 2,000 fatally injured drivers from seven states. Drugs other than alcohol were present in approximately 18 percent of these drivers. In about two thirds, the drugs were present **with alcohol**; usually at blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) greater than 0.10 percent. In the remaining one third, drugs were present without alcohol.

Drug presence, by itself, does not prove that the drug was a causal factor. A "responsibility analysis" procedure was used to determine the degree to which the identified drugs contributed to the crashes. The analysis found no evidence that drivers with drugs only were more likely to be responsible for crashes than were drug free drivers. The analysis found that drugs contributed to crash causation when combined with alcohol (especially low BACs) or other drugs. **These findings are limited by the small sample size.** Additional research is appropriate, particularly to study the effects on driving of drug and alcohol combinations.

Study of Drugged Driving Arrests and Convictions in DEC Communities

DEC programs were assessed at various law enforcement agencies that had participated in the program for at least two years. Comparisons were made with agencies from the same states that had not adopted DEC.

Prior to DEC implementation, arrests for drugged driving were very rare. After initiating the program, DEC sites showed increased drugged driving arrests and convictions while there were no similar increases in the comparison communities. In the DEC sites, drugged driving arrests were 1-2 percent of all impaired driving arrests.

When the DRE concluded the suspects were under the influence of drugs and laboratory test results were available, at least one of the specific drug classes named by the DRE was detected 74 percent of the time.

Overall, 65 percent of the drivers suspected of being under the influence of drugs were convicted on an impaired driving charge. Comparable conviction rates for the alcohol impaired drivers in these sites ranged from approximately 80 to 90 percent.

Conclusions

1. Alcohol is the predominate drug problem in motor vehicle crashes. Drugs other than alcohol are not involved as frequently, and do not appear as likely as alcohol to increase crash risk. Drugs appear to be most dangerous when combined with alcohol or other drugs.
2. The DEC program produced an increase in drugged driving arrests, but the number of drug impaired driving cases is about 2 percent of all impairment arrests. DREs, on average, conduct less than one evaluation of a suspected drugged driver per month.

Policy Implications

This research indicates that drugs are not as big a highway safety problem as they were thought to be at the beginning of the DEC program. However, drug impaired drivers are operating on our highways, and attention still needs to be focused on this problem.

Research should continue to determine which drug and drug-alcohol combinations constitute the greatest hazards. Work should also continue to develop less expensive and more efficient procedures for police use in detecting drug impaired drivers while continuing support for existing DEC efforts.

Future NHTSA Work

- In order to continue work to determine the scope of the problem, NHTSA will review recent literature and conduct additional crash analyses, simulator, and on-road studies.
- Laboratory work will also continue to assess the validity of clinical and psychophysical cues of drug impairment.
- The suspect interview procedure appears to be crucial for drug identification. The critical aspects of the interview procedure need to be documented and standardized in order to take advantage of the most effective interview techniques.
- NHTSA will continue providing technical support to jurisdictions that are implementing the DEC Program for police use.

For additional information about this subject, contact: the Office of Program Development and Evaluation, NHTSA, NTS-30, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590.

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